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ABSTRACT

Educational Assessment is at the cornerstone of education in the 1990s. Advocates for alternative assessment believe that the new tasks should be redesigned to more closely resemble real learning tasks. Portfolio assessment encourages an integration between assessment and instruction and results in several positive educational outcomes. Portfolios represent students' learning in a variety of ways, including depth, breadth, and change over time. With portfolios, the assessment activities and classroom activities can occur throughout the school day. Portfolio assessment can provide educators with an assessment system that includes multiple measures taken over time to create a complete picture of student achievement. The paper describes a portfolio assessment program at a Maryland elementary school, including requirements for implementation, staff training, involvement and support of parents, stages of portfolio assessment use, home-school connections, and a celebration of the year-long commitment to using portfolio assessment. The program placed particular emphasis on parent participation at early morning coffees and afternoon teas, parental commitment to the program, and parental involvement and training in the portfolio assessment process. Appendices include a listing of reference sources, a sample primary portfolio, portfolio conference sheet, student presentation form, partner reflection form, and parent or guardian portfolio feedback form. (Author/SD)

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Parent Involvement: More Power in the Portfolio Process

Donna J. Weldin & Sandra R. Tumarkin

Educational assessment is at the cornerstone of education in the 1990's. The current emphasis on assessment is resulting in an explosion of interest in alternative forms of assessment. Advocates for alternative assessment believe that the new tasks should be redesigned to more closely resemble real learning tasks. Both the process and the product should be examined, providing a clearer, more detailed picture of a child's abilities. Assessment should determine whether students can monitor and evaluate their own understanding (Rothman, 1988).

Alternative assessments demand more complex and challenging mental processes from students. These assessments activate students' prior knowledge, recent learnings, and relevant skills in order to solve authentic problems. Alternative or authentic assessment may include performance-based tests, observations, open-ended questioning, exhibitions, interviews, and portfolios. Portfolio assessment is one form of authentic assessment that documents growth over time and focuses on the processes involved with learning. Portfolios are a purposeful collection of student work that includes efforts, progress, and achievement. The collection of portfolio entries include student participation in the selection of the content and the reflection of the work. The criteria for selecting contents, judging merit, and monitoring progress is also included (Johnson & Rose, 1997).

Portfolio assessment encourages an integration between assessment and instruction. It represents students' abilities in a variety of ways - depth, breadth, and change over time. With portfolios, the assessment activities and classroom activities can occur throughout the school day. Teachers do not have to take time away from the instructional program. Portfolio assessment can provide educators with an assessment system that includes multiple measures taken over time. Portfolios also have the ability of providing longitudinal data and multiple measures of the same outcomes to create a complete picture of student achievement (Graves & Sunstein, 1992).

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Portfolio Guidelines

Portfolios are as varied as the students who create them. There is no unanimous agreement as to what information should comprise a portfolio. Whatever the purpose, selecting the goals for the portfolio will shape the assessment. The criteria for selecting goals should include the following: They are developed based upon individual strengths and needs.

- Assessment should be an ongoing part of instruction.
- Assessment should inform instruction. Teachers learn from portfolios not only what to teach but also how and when to teach it.
- Assessment is multidimensional and authentic. Students are assessed while they are actually involved with their learning (Valencia, 1990).

The guiding idea behind portfolio assessment is to provide more opportunities for richer, authentic assessment of student achievement. It can become a window into students' minds, a means for both the students and teacher to understand the educational process that students undergo. Creating the integration of instruction and assessment through portfolios requires careful and methodological planning by the teacher. The following criteria can serve as guidelines for developing portfolios:

- Final products contain evidence of student's self-reflection.
- Students are involved in selecting some of the pieces that are to be included in the portfolio.
- Entries for the portfolio are determined by the purpose of the portfolio and by the context of other exhibits found there.
- Portfolio contents include the following components: (a) rationale or purpose; (b) goals; (c) contents; (d) standards; (e) judgments about the contents
- Portfolios should contain information that illustrates student growth. (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

Deciding how and when documents go into students' portfolios is dependent upon the nature of the portfolio. The contents can include a variety of products: classroom assignments; finished or rough drafts; tests or quizzes; videotapes of performances or special events; audiotapes of speeches, book talks, or oral reading experiences; observations by others; and student work created especially for the portfolio. (Figure 1). The process of developing portfolios includes both uniform and individualized data. The baseline entries and the subsequent goal setting process determine the focus for the contents of the portfolio.

The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" supports our belief that it takes a total community to give power and meaning to portfolio assessment. In this article, we describe certain strategies that we have found effective for promoting parent collaboration in our school-wide portfolio project.

An invitation (Figure 2) was extended to all parents, grandparents, siblings, guardians, and community members to join in the end of the year portfolio celebration at our school. How did our journey begin? Let's find out...

Our Beginning

Strawberry Knoll is a large suburban elementary school of approximately 630 students ranging in age from infancy through grade five. Our diverse community represents many socio-economic levels. The student mobility rate continues to increase each year. In 1994 Strawberry Knoll Elementary School implemented portfolio assessment on a school-wide basis. We embarked on this journey as a means to observe and document individual student growth, encourage student ownership and responsibility for learning, and to empower both teacher and student decision-making. We viewed portfolio assessment as an ongoing educational tool for both assessment and instruction. "Portfolios seem to have enormous appeal to teachers, students, and parents, most likely because they encourage active participation in the assessment process and provide tangible and understandable evidence (Valencia, 1990). Portfolios provided us with the ability to document individual growth over time, reflect on progress, and establish future educational goals. With students being the primary shareholders, they enabled and encouraged both students and teachers to actively participate in instructional planning and follow-up assessment. One significant factor affecting success has been our commitment to ongoing staff development. All staff training sessions occurred at school during the teachers' regularly scheduled workday. Training sessions were conducted throughout each school-year at staff meetings, inservice training sessions, professional study group meetings, and at team meetings. Our staff development efforts involved training sessions that varied in content, audience, topic, and prior experience. All of training was conducted by Strawberry Knoll staff members. Initially, the principal, reading specialist, and kindergarten teacher assumed responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating the staff

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development efforts. However, as the project developed, many other staff members assumed leadership roles for various components associated with portfolio assessment.

One of our major thrusts surrounding portfolio assessment has been the involvement and support of parents. Portfolio assessment empowered both teachers and students to design, implement, and evaluate instructional strategies and programs. It encouraged a "bottom-up" approach for diagnostic and instructional goal setting. Through a collaborative approach, teachers and students assessed growth, reflected on strengths, and established individual goals for the future. Portfolio assessment promoted self-regulated student learning and ownership. It enabled the school community to develop a comprehensive instruction and assessment program which integrates the two categories into one continuous, cyclical plan. Portfolio assessment can provide the opportunity to demonstrate academic and self-growth over time. It has the capacity to reach even greater heights if parent involvement is included throughout the process.

The Early Stages

Parent involvement is a necessary component for student success. The home and school partnership is critical for continued school improvement and success. Portfolio assessment, a valuable form of alternative assessment, also needs parent support and active participation. Too often portfolio assessment has excluded parents from the process. "Traditionally, families have been left outside the assessment process, yet parents are the ones who know their children best." (Hill & Ruptic, 1994). They have been left to wonder about the purposes, goals, contents, and need for this type of assessment. Instead, parent training should be an ongoing component of a school's portfolio training plan. When designing the training sessions for portfolio assessment, parent informational sessions should be included in the long-range plans. Systematic, ongoing, and purposeful training sessions are recommended for parents. An initial meeting could focus on the purpose and goals of portfolio assessment. By describing the projected outcomes, advantages, characteristics, and format of portfolio assessment, parents, can then begin to understand the process and purposes. "Teachers who invite parents to participate in celebrating the positive efforts of their children help parents gain a deeper understanding of the process of developing as a reader and a writer. It helps parents appreciate the strengths their children have

developed as well as understand the need for the support and kinds of activities and instruction you are providing." (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991). An evening or early morning meeting can provide the forum for parents to obtain information and to seek answers to any questions that they have. A narrative accounting of the process is also helpful as a reference guide for parents. The initial meeting with parents can lay the groundwork for future training sessions that are conducted related to portfolio assessment components (organization, self-evaluation, reflection, etc.) or by components evident at various grade levels.

Moving Ahead

Throughout the school year, we involve our parents in the portfolio process at Strawberry Knoll. We emphasize open, continuous communication between home and school. For example, at our "Back-to-School Night" in September, classroom teachers discuss the rationale for school-wide portfolio implementation and provide concrete examples of portfolio entries with reflections and goals at the various grade levels. By conference time in November, our parents are familiar with the ways portfolios help to demonstrate longitudinal growth. In addition to the report card, which is mandated throughout our county, the portfolio allows parents and teachers to view added dimensions of the child as a learner. Through student-generated reflections and goal setting, portfolios provide insights into each child's interest, strengths, weaknesses, and personal aspirations. It serves as a window by allowing us to view the child as a reflective learner. Comments from parents demonstrate their enthusiasm for the insightful information that portfolios reveal to them during their parent-teacher conference. Gabrielle's mother remarked," I can see the growth from month to month and the actual level of improvement obtained. The portfolio has much more meaning than simply seeing a letter grade on the report card."

Additional information related to components of portfolio assessment was also provided to parents through the principal's weekly newsletter. Topics such as portfolio characteristics, benefits, goal setting, organization, and student empowerment were included during the year. In this way, parents became more knowledgeable about portfolios and increased their understanding of the importance of alternative assessment.

Expanding Our Knowledge/Combining the Pieces/Putting the Pieces Together

One of the most successful home-school connections was our early morning parent "coffees." These informal gatherings serve as a time to inform parents about grade-level curriculum, school-wide initiatives, and upcoming events. Our early morning get togethers provided a comfortable atmosphere for parents and guardians to discuss relevant topics, ask questions, share suggestions, and voice concerns. In keeping with this format, we scheduled a "portfolio coffee" in early spring. This event reinforced background knowledge related to portfolios and provided a forum for parents to see portfolios in progress. By having both a primary and intermediate grade level teacher share student portfolios, parents were able to see how the portfolios have evolved since the beginning of the school year. Teachers modeled some of the ways used to promote self-reflection and goal setting with their students. The audience enjoyed reading some of the students' self-reflections and marveled at the transitions between and among grade levels. One parent of a third grade student stated," The portfolio allowed my child to explain his progress, success and his goals for the next marking period. It was a great initiator of discussion between Tyrone and me." Another parent added, "I like to see the work with the rubrics attached. I can see what criteria must be met and how closely my child meets standards." For those parents who were unable to attend the meeting, a videotape of the session was made available. We have found that by videotaping our coffees, we are able to reach those parents who otherwise would be unable to become involved with the school or our programs. Our own videotape library is the best rental in town!

Celebrate the Success

By the end of the year at Strawberry Knoll, students, at all grade levels, use their portfolios to talk about their own individual progress and show examples to document their growth. This ability is a direct result of the year long deliberate, well-planned teacher modeling, student/teacher conferences, peer conferences, and cross-grade level portfolio sharing sessions. When asked how his portfolio has changed this year Robbie, a fifth grader responded," I used to put something in my portfolio because I got an A. Now I put things in my portfolio if I tried my best or I need to work on it. I don't always put in my best work because then you have a hard time coming up with goals. You can't say you want to get an A++++."

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Our end of the year celebration, the "portfolio tea," serves as a positive culminating activity for students, staff, parents, and guardians. " Parental and other stakeholder's involvement in the assessment program is vital to supporting the learner's ongoing literacy development and the legitimization of assessment practices consistent with what literacy instruction should be." (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991). From the initial phase of designing the invitation to assisting with developing the conference forms, (Figures 3,4,5), students take ownership of this time to share their successes with an adult. Prior to the celebration, students organized their portfolios according to their own internal schema, stated a rationale for their format, practiced conducting a conference with a peer, and conferred with their teacher. When the big day finally arrived, excitement permeated the building. A staggered schedule allowed parents, grandparents, siblings and guardians to conference with all of the their children in the school. Staff members who were not responsible for a classroom of children made themselves available so that each child in the school had an adult to provide feedback (Figure 6).

Reflections

Reflecting upon our progress this year, we have found an increased commitment toward school involvement through the use of portfolio assessment. Parents endorsed our initiative and supported their children's efforts to become more independent and self-reliant learners. As one parent summed it up, " I can see the academic progress. I also like to see how she assesses herself and for what reasons." By working hand-in-hand with teachers, parents visibly strengthened the home and school partnership. Our parent survey also supported our initiative. Approxiamately 85% of our parents said that the portfolio enabled them to gain a better understanding of how their child was learning and growing. Students now see their parents as informed partners who can support them in their quest to become empowered, self-reflective learners. And, as a staff, we now know what power parents can bring to the portfolio process!

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SAMPLE PRIMARY PORTFOLIO

9/10 Drawing of family
Writing sample from writing workshop-baseline data
Math worksheet-baseline data
Art project

10/15 Response in reading journal-baseline data
Audiotape of reading

11/17 Science project
Writing sample from writing workshop
Math response from learning log
Project from music

12/15 Drawing of my family
Social studies project
Art project

1/7 Writing sample from writer's works
Response in reading journal
Audiotape of reading
Problem solving paper in math

2/4 Port folio Pal conference form
Music project
Art project

3/5 Writing sample from writing workshop
Math response from learning log
Photograph of reading project

4/10 Science paper
Art project
Writing sample from writing workshop
Math response froml learning log

5/5 Photograph of group Social studies project
Audiotape of reading
Response in reading journal
Portfolio pals conference form

6/3 Forms for presenting portfolio to parents at the Portfolio Tea

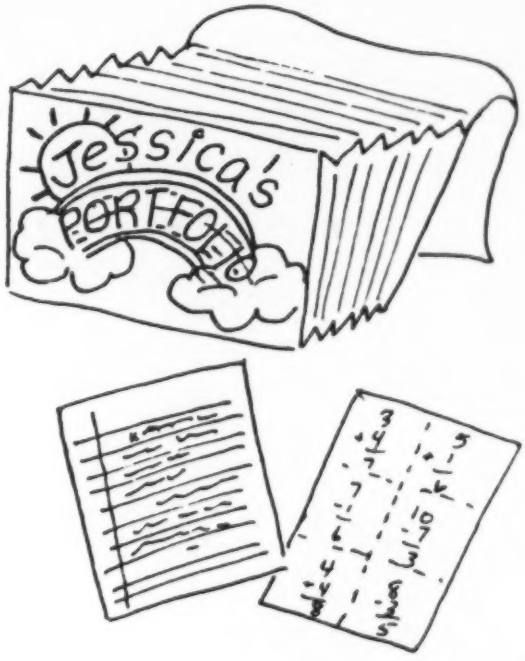

Figure 1

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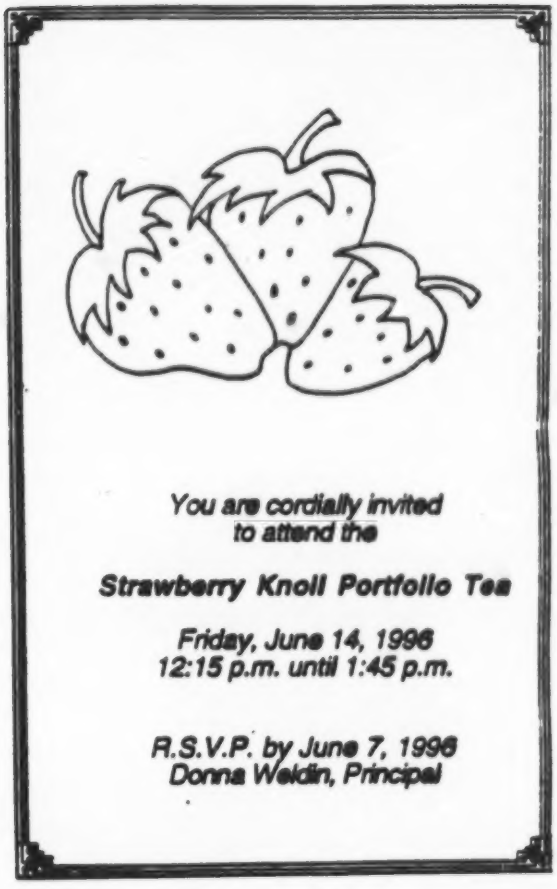
You are cordially invited
to attend the
Strawberry Knoll Portfolio Tea
Friday, June 14, 1996
12:15 p.m. until 1:45 p.m.
R.S.V.P. by June 7, 1996
Donna Weldin, Principal

Figure 2

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PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE

Name: Jarrell Grading Period 3

What does your port folio suggest about your strengths as a learner?

I can use my science data to make a graph. I can recognize line segments and shapes in geometry.

How does your portfolio show that you have changed?

My writing is better than it was in September. I use more discriptive words.

What does your portfolio reveal about any difficulties you are having?

I have a hard time remembering Social Studies facts.

After reviewing your portfolio, what areas do you feel you should concentrate on for the rest of this year?

I will focus on looking at my notes in Social Studies before a test. I will try to write more complete letters to Mrs. V. in reading

Figure 3

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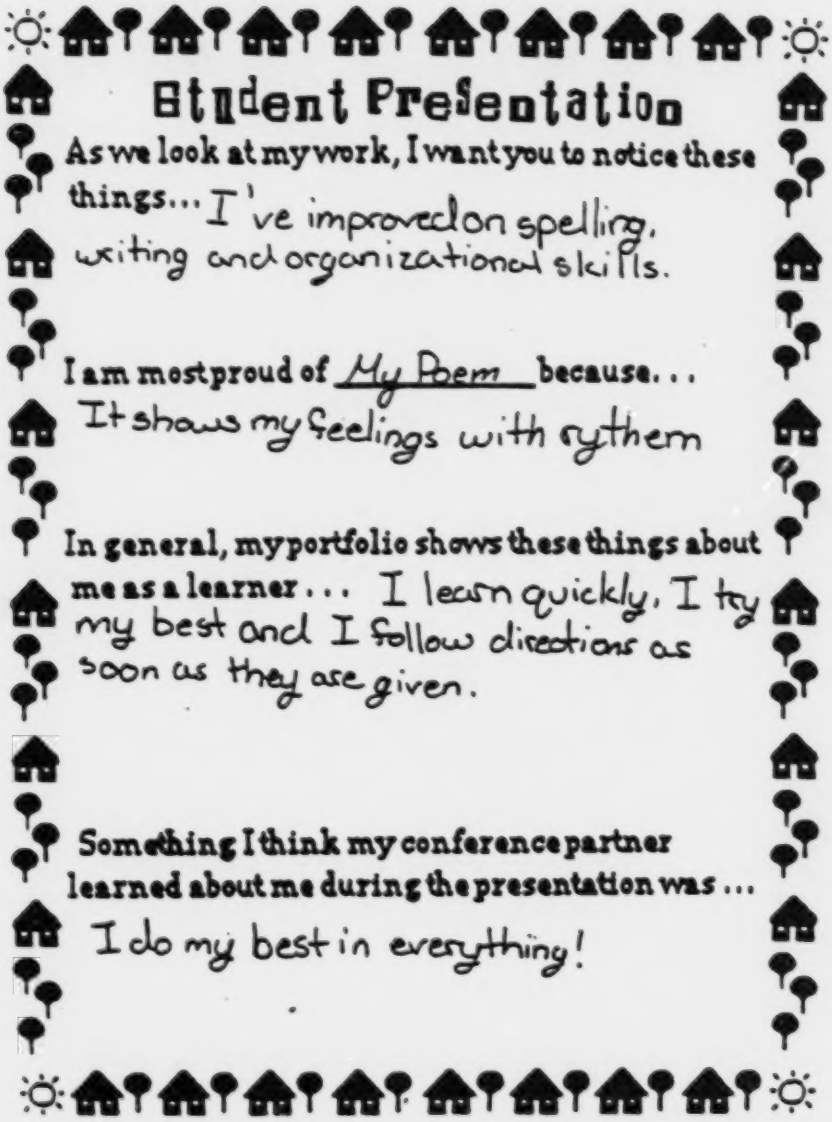
Student Presentation
As we look at my work, I want you to notice these things... I've improved on spelling, writing and organizational skills.
I am most proud of My Poem because...
It shows my feelings with rythem
In general, my portfolio shows these things about me as a learner... I learn quickly, I try my best and I follow directions as soon as they are given.
Something I think my conference partner learned about me during the presentation was...
I do my best in everything!

Figure 4

Partner Reflection

A Note of Praise . . .
I'm very proud of my grandson, Ryan. He knows much more than I did in the 5th grade.

What I learned about my conference partner . . . Ryan is going to be tough to keep up with, but fun!

This conference was different from other conferences because . . .
It was a good summary of what has transpired in the past year.

Figure 5

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PARENT/GUARDIAN

PORTFOLIO FEEDBACK

How does your child's portfolio provide you with a better understanding of your child's progress?

It really shows me how far he has come throughout the year. I see that he has become more focused and puts more effort and care into his work. I can also see the areas we need to work on.

What additional information about portfolio assessment would be helpful for you?

I thought it was very helpful and gave a good summary of his abilities

Thank you!

PARENT/GUARDIAN

PORTFOLIO FEEDBACK

How does your child's portfolio provide you with a better understanding of your child's progress?

Rob's portfolio is absolutely wonderful. He has done exceptionally well in all subjects.

The wide variety of tests and quizzes and his performance in them is very good

What additional information about portfolio assessment would be helpful for you? I think the whole idea of sharing the portfolio with us is terrific! I don't think there is anything else more informative. Teachers - keep up the good work! I am not only proud of Rob, I am proud of his teachers too!

Figure 6

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